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ABSTRACT

The research literature on oral achievement testing is reviewed, and advantages and disadvantages of oral tests are described. A number of suggestions are made for improving the objectivity, reliability, and validity of oral tests. The results of a survey of the attitudes and experiences of a selected sample of college students with regard to classroom tests in general and oral tests in particular are presented. It is concluded that oral achievement testing is useful in certain situations, particularly when both test and students are carefully prepared. When carefully planned, administered, and evaluated, oral achievement tests are fairly reliable assessments of abilities and skills, many of which are inadequately measured by written objective or essay examinations. Nevertheless, oral testing is not popular with students, and teachers who employ it must prepare the examinees--both cognitively and emotionally--as well as the test questions. (Author/PN)

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THE CASE FOR ORAL ACHIEVEMENT TESTING

by

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The Case for Oral Achievement Testing

Oral testing is defined as an evaluation situation in which responses to questions on a test are given orally by examinees. The questions may be presented either orally, in writing, or both. Oral achievement examinations are used more often in European educational institutions than in the United States (see Glovrozov, 1974; Graham, 1963; Hitchman, 1964). In the United States, oral testing, which has declined over time, becomes less common as the academic ladder is ascended. Thus, oral questioning occurs more frequently at the elementary than high school level and more frequently in high school than in college. Masters and doctoral orals are still found at the graduate level, but, as with foreign language requirements, are viewed by many as anachronistic and to some extent pro forma.

Despite recognition of the need for active student involvement in the learning process, a typical college class is primarily lecture-oriented, involving relatively little discussion or oral questioning of students. Accompanying the mass American educational enterprise has been a decline in student practice in basic writing and speaking skills and an increasing reliance on objective testing of simple memory and recognitive learning. The situation would appear to be ripe for a reconsideration of oral testing.

Because the writer has come to believe, during the past few years, that almost all college courses should provide practice not only in reading but also in writing and speaking, he has been using essay and oral tests more and more. This

has not always been easy; it is time-consuming and often resisted by students. However, when employed with a sensitivity to their advantages and disadvantages, oral tests can make an important contribution to education.

Disadvantages of Oral Tests

It has been stated that students do not like oral tests and feel that they are unfair measures of subject-matter knowledge and understanding. On the other hand, teachers of speech, dramatics, English, and foreign languages often decry the current inattention to the assessment of spoken language skills and feel that the consequence is a multitude of graduates who cannot speak correctly, comprehensibly, or comfortably. But while many teachers of languages and other subjects in which the development of oral language skills is important admit the desirability of oral exercises and evaluations, they simultaneously point to the inefficiency and subjectivity of oral testing (see Platt, 1961). Illustrative of this subjectivity and the potential bias in rating oral answers are the results of a study by Crowl and McGinitie (1974). These investigators found that the grades assigned by 62 teachers to identical answers spoken by black and white youngsters were lower for the former than the latter.

Although individually-administered intelligence tests requiring oral responses have not been generally criticized for their lack of objectivity, reliability, and validity, orally-administered achievement tests have, since the early part of this century, tended to be perceived as inefficient and lacking in psychometric rigor. Oral tests have been

faulted for being too time-consuming, providing only a limited sample of responses, and for being poorly planned in most instances.

Advantages of Oral Tests

Even the critics of oral achievement examinations admit that they possess certain advantages over written tests. One possible advantage is the interactive social situation provided by oral examinations, permitting evaluation of personal qualities such as appearance, style, and manner of speaking. The face-to-face situation also makes cheating, and perhaps bluffing, less likely on oral than on written tests (Ebel, 1979).

Other advantages of oral tests are that they frequently require responses at a higher intellectual level than written tests, they provide practice in oral communication and social interaction (Peterson, 1974). and they promote a more careful review of the material. Furthermore, oral tests can be completed in less time than comparable written examinations and examinees obtain immediate feedback on the correctness of their answers. Oral examiners may also be better able to follow the thought processes of examinees and to determine the boundaries of their knowledge and understanding of the subject more readily (Glovrozov, 1974; Platt, 1971). These boundaries can be delineated by asking examinees to explain, defend, or elaborate on answers. Finally, the time required to prepare oral questions and evaluate answers to them may be less than for written tests.

Oral tests are especially appropriate with primary school children and other students who have reading or writing problems.

Even at higher grade levels, administration of an oral examination is occasionally justifiable when time and/or facilities for duplicating test materials are in short supply (Green, 1975). And in subjects such as speech, foreign languages, and dramatics, oral examinations are critical.

Improving the Reliability and Validity of Oral Tests

Special forms for rating performance can improve the objectivity, and hence reliability, of oral tests (see Deitz, 1961; Green, 1975; Guerra, Abramson & Newmark, 1964). Although oral examinations typically have lower reliabilities than comparable written tests, careful attention to the design of questions, the construction of "model" answers to questions before the test is administered, and the use of multiple raters or scorers have resulted in reliability coefficients in the .60s and .70s in certain college, graduate level, and professional school courses (Carter, 1962; Levine & McGuire, 1970; Hitchman, 1966). Other suggestions for improving the reliability of oral examinations are requiring examinees to delay answering until they have thought about the question (Meredith, 1978) and tape recording answers for later playback and reevaluation.

Whatever the test administration procedure may be, it should be recognized that students usually regard oral examinations with mixed feelings and often considerable apprehension. Consequently, efforts to calm their fears and provide alternative testing methods for those who experience great difficulty coping with oral tests can help improve their effectiveness. The writer has found that, when special efforts were made to establish rapport with examinees, many actually came to enjoy

oral tests.

The fact that scores on oral achievement tests have only moderate correlations with comparable written examinations suggests that the two types of evaluation measure different aspects of performance. In general, knowledge of specific facts can be assessed more quickly with objective written tests, so oral examinations should not contain many questions of this kind. On the other hand, as with essay tests, oral examinations are especially appropriate for questions requiring extended responses (Green, 1975).

Because the achievements or behaviors assessed by oral tests are perhaps just as important as those measured by written tests, Hitchman (1964) argued that more attention should be paid to the training of the main source of unreliability in oral tests--the examiners or evaluators themselves. Oral test examiners should be thoroughly knowledgeable in the subject and keenly aware of the kinds of oral responses desired. Categories for describing or rating oral responses should refer to specific behaviors rather than to vague, undefined terms such as "creative potential, character, general ability, or interpersonal effectiveness." These variables are, of course, no more easily measured by oral tests than by written tests (Ebel, 1979).

Oral examiners need to be shrewd and skillful in probing for further information to determine the boundaries of a student's knowledge and understanding. Useful guidelines for designing such probing questions can be found in books by Suchman (1966) and Taba (1967). Finally, evaluators of oral

test answers must be as free as possible from favoritism and other subjective influences on test scores.

A Survey of College Students

To provide more objective data on what college students think about tests, and oral tests in particular, the writer recently administered a questionnaire to 457 students, approximately 25% of the undergraduates enrolled in Seaver College in 1981-82. The questionnaire and percentages of the sample marking specific response categories for each item are given in Table 1. These results indicate that the students were fairly negative in their attitudes toward oral tests.

Insert Table 1 about here

Additional results were obtained by crosstabulating the responses given to items 1 and 2 with those given to other items on the questionnaire. Significant findings pertaining to oral testing are presented in Table 2.[1] From the sex and college classification differences noted in Table 2 it appears that girls and lowerclassmen were more negative than boys and lowerclassmen in their attitudes toward oral testing. One should, of course, exercise caution in generalizing these results beyond Seaver College undergraduates.

Insert Table 2 about here

Conclusions

In general, the findings from a study of the research

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[1]Readers who desire a copy of the complete results of this survey should address their requests to the writer.

literature and from administration of the questionnaire indicate that oral achievement testing can be useful in certain situations and that many college students appreciate the fact. This is especially true of upperclassmen and students in smaller classes. It also seems to be truer of brighter, more verbally facile, and more socially adept students.

When carefully planned, administered, and evaluated, oral achievement tests are fairly reliable assessments of abilities and skills, many of which are inadequately measured by written objective or essay examinations. Nevertheless, oral testing is not popular with students, and teachers who employ it must prepare the examinees--both cognitively and emotionally--as well as the test questions. Since oral testing is not commonplace, much of the fear of this kind of evaluation is probably fear of the unknown. It would be expected that greater exposure to oral achievement testing would reduce this fear and that students would then express more positive attitudes and a greater willingness to be evaluated by this method.

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Table 1

Testing Opinionnaire*

Directions: We are attempting to collect information on the kinds of tests that college students have taken most often in schools and colleges and what types of tests and testing procedures they prefer. In order to make this effort worthwhile, we shall appreciate it if you will indicate your true judgments or feelings by checking or writing the appropriate response to each of the following questions in the space provided.

1. What is your sex?
   58% Female
   42% Male

2. What is your college classification?
   39% Freshman
   29% Sophomore
   20% Junior
   11% Senior

3. In what country have you received most of your formal education?
   U.S. = 85%, Far East = 6%, Europe + 3%, Middle East = 3%, Latin America = 2%

4. On a scale where A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, and D = 1, what is your approximate grade-point average in college?
   21% 3.5 - 4.0
   41% 3.0 - 3.4
   25% 2.5 - 2.9
   12% 2.0 - 2.4
   2% 1.5 - 1.9
   ___ Below 1.5

5. Approximately how often should tests be given in most college courses?
   7% Every week
   63% Every two weeks
   16% Once a month
   13% 2-3 times each term
   1% Once every term
   1% Never

6. In general, should tests given in college courses be timed? That is, should there be fairly strict time limits when taking tests?
   36% Yes
   64% No

7. Do you believe that tests should contain optional questions which students can answer for extra credit?
   78% Yes
   22% No

8. Should all students be required to attempt all questions on a test, or should they be permitted to omit some questions without penalty?
   61% Should attempt all questions
   39% Should be permitted to omit some questions

Table 1 (cont'd)

9. If you had a choice, would you rather take an essay test (on which you compose your own answers) or an objective test (on which you simply identify the answers)?
   20% Essay
   64% Objective
   16% No preference

10. Do you think that you would study more, less, or about the same for an essay test as for an objective test in the same subject?
   34% Study more for essay test
   18% Study more for objective test
   48% Study about the same for both

11. What type of objective test do you prefer?
   9% True-false
   39% Multiple-choice
   3% Matching
   5% Short-answer (completion)
   43% A mixture of various types

12. Would you rather have your test papers scored by a machine or by a human grader?
   21% By machine
   34% By human grader
   45% It makes no difference

13. In general, would you rather have the questions on a test presented to you orally (read aloud by the instructor or someone else) or in writing?
   2% Orally
   93% In writing
   5% No preference

14. In general, would you rather write out your answers to the questions on a test or give them orally to an examiner?
   85% Write out
   9% Give orally
   7% No preference

15. If you were required to give your answers to test questions orally, do you feel that you would do best if you were questioned by one professor, two or more professors, by one or more of your fellow students, or by a combination of professors and students?
   66% One professor
   10% Two or more professors
   8% One or more students
   16% A combination of professors and students

16. Did you ever take an oral test (a test on which you gave your answers aloud) when you were in elementary school (grades 1-6)?
   59% Yes
   20% No
   21% Don't remember

Table 1 (cont'd)

17. Did you ever take an oral test when you were in junior high school (grades 7-9)?
52% Yes
33% No
15% Don't remember

18. Did you ever take an oral test when you were in senior high school (grades 10-12)?
50% Yes
46% No
4% Don't remember

19. List the college courses in which you have had one or more oral tests.

0 courses = 81%, 1 course = 13%, 2 courses = 4%, 3 or more courses = 2%

20. Would you like to see oral testing procedures, in which the questions are either presented orally by the examiner and/or answered orally by the student, used more frequently in college courses?
14% Yes. O.K. for the examiner to present questions orally, but student should answer in writing.
12% Yes. O.K. for the student to answer orally, but questions should be presented in writing.
19% Yes. O.K. for questions to be presented orally and answered orally.
55% No. Questions should neither be presented orally nor answered orally.

21. In what college courses do you feel that tests on which students give their answers orally would be most useful?

Number of courses listed: 0 = 43%, 1 = 35%, 2 = 14%, 3 = 5%, 4 = 2%, 5 = 1%

Comments: Use the space below to write any comments you wish to make concerning the testing procedures and other evaluations used in college courses.

Table 2

Significant Comparisons of Items 1 and 2 With Items 13-21 of Questionnaire in Table 1

Items	Chi Square	df	p	Interpretation
1 vs 13	6.00	2	.05	A larger percentage of girls than boys preferred questions in writing rather than orally.
1 vs 14	6.32	2	.04	A larger percentage of boys than girls reported no preference for whether answers given orally or in writing.
1 vs 20	7.86	3	.05	A larger percentage of boys than girls said OK for examiner to present questions orally but that students should answer in writing.
2 vs 19	28.88	15	.02	Upperclassmen reported having had more oral tests than lowerclassmen.
2 vs 21	26.75	15	.03	Upperclassmen listed more courses in which oral tests would be useful than lowerclassmen.